

## Where There is Nothing, Read that I Love You: Simone Weil's 'Attention' and the Art of Perception

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Thus our moments of Cartesian clairvoyance are useless without an art of perception, that is, a gymnastic which allows us to recall pure understanding, while not stopping, as we do in reflection, being attentive to the dances of our body. But doubtless this gymnastic would not be possible without the experience of special perceptions by which the spontaneous dance of our body, although it sometimes compels our attention, does not hinder, and perhaps aids, the use of pure understanding. These special perceptions are given to each one of us by humankind through works of art.<sup>1)</sup>

The subject of what follows is Simone Weil's argument on the training of attention. The two main texts on which I will draw are Weil's essays *De la perception ou l'aventure de Protée*<sup>2)</sup> and *Essai sur la notion de lecture*<sup>3)</sup>. I will articulate the argument by giving an account of my art project *Bâton de l'aveugle*: a video composed of over one hundred blind contour drawings<sup>4)</sup> of Weil's 1935 Renault factory identity card<sup>5)</sup>. Each drawing took between 1 and 60 minutes and, in the video, each drawing appears for a number of seconds equivalent to the number of minutes it took to draw it<sup>6)</sup>.

I will consider two strands of Weil's argument. The first strand adduces that works of art are useful means in the training of attention. The second strand is best introduced with a metaphor which Weil uses: the metaphor of the blind person. How does a blind person learn to read objects with a cane? At first, the

sensations caused by the cane on the hand are overwhelming and the blind person finds it difficult or impossible to perceive what is at the end of the cane. When the blind person has mastered the cane, the sensations of it on the hand hardly register and attention is directed to the object conveyed by the sensations. With the image of the blind person, Weil illustrates a general point about the perception of reality, namely, that, for Weil, we read everything that happens to us in a certain way, and, by a slow apprenticeship, we can change the way we read, as the blind person does<sup>7</sup>. For Weil, we can improve how we read: the aim is to read everything that happens as *good* for the very fact that it happens, instead of interpreting certain event as good (e.g. pleasurable occurrences) and other things as bad (e.g. painful occurrences)<sup>8</sup>.

Weil holds that human beings are frequently fooled by their disorderly imagination because they distort their perception with the reflection of their emotions; for instance, Weil writes,

[...] when the sun rises, I do not know if the landscape seems to me more joyous because I feel happier, or because the sun is higher; a real landscape is illuminated by my happiness as much as by the sun's rays.<sup>9</sup>

### **works of art are useful means in the training of attention**

In such conditions, attention to the world is impossible because the world keeps changing abruptly under the distorting effects of ever-changing emotions, and nothing is stable enough to become an object of attention<sup>10</sup>. For Weil, even if one could attain an emotionless state in which reality is perceived as a web of pure mathematical relationships, nobody could remain in this state of pure reason for very long, because, for her, imagination and emotions are necessarily involved in all perception<sup>11</sup>. What can one do, then, in order to pay attention to the world? One can train in the art of perception by contemplating works of art. Works of art move us aesthetically and, yet, they remain indifferent to us:

[...] in a painted sunrise, even if the light can make me happy, this happiness will never be accompanied by an accretion of the light.<sup>12</sup>

By imitating the moving indifference of works of art, one can learn to direct

one's attention to the world without distorting it with the reflection of emotions. Eventually, this leads to love of everything that happens<sup>13</sup>.

### synthesis of intellection and sensation

Weil's argument can be summarised as follows: The world is ordered but extremely complex and it is difficult to perceive its order; the senses of those unskilled in the art of perception are passively subjected to the world, so they respond to this aesthetic assault by fabricating illusions; the order of works of art, on the other hand, is simple and, unlike purely mathematical order, it is an aesthetic order – one can *feel* it, not only *think* it, and it is thus suited to human perception, which is a synthesis of intellection and sensation<sup>14</sup>. To elucidate the notion of aesthetic order, Weil gives the example of the sounds of a piece of music: these sounds are moving, but their order is indifferent to us because it is based on invariable rules which have nothing to do with the emotions we feel while listening<sup>15</sup>.

One aim of the blind drawing project was to produce an image that carries a quality of moving indifference. The image of a face is psychologically charged, attention is drawn to it almost automatically, and it is easy to read expressions in it (even an expressionless face is a face with an expressionless *expression*); in short, the image of a face is moving. But, in blind drawing, eye, nose, mouth, etc. are all represented indifferently by the same kind of line; in fact, there is only one line in each drawing; and the order of the images in the video is indifferent to what one may call 'the emerging lingering family resemblance,' in the sense that this resemblance is sometimes lost. In other words, while the content of the project carries a moving agency, its form carries a quality of indifference<sup>16</sup>. Furthermore, the erratic duration of each drawing in the video creates an impression of indifference<sup>17</sup>.

As regards the second strand of the argument, which concerns the shifting of attention, I hoped that, in time, the drawings might begin to indicate a shift of attention from the whole of the face, whose psychological charge, as I said, attracts attention, to the far end of the "cane of my eyes," so to speak, where the eyes "meet" the contour of shapes with no explicit figurative significance<sup>18</sup>.



### attention is love of reality

I conclude with a few words on the role of attention in Weil's transcendental metaphysics. The object of the most elevated attention<sup>19</sup> is reality: attention is love of reality. But reality, which for Weil is the creation of God, is perceived as *emptiness*, as *de-void* of love: even though God loves through reality<sup>20</sup>, we cannot read this love – and yet, for Weil, we must love reality:

It is not that one must love evil. But one must love God through evil. When a child while playing breaks a precious object, the mother does not love this destruction. But later if the son moves far away or dies, she remembers this accident with tenderness because she only sees in it one of the manifestations of the existence of her child.<sup>21</sup>

A parallel can be made with a letter of Denis Diderot to his lover Sophie Voland. God means love through creation as Diderot, uncertain whether his characters will be legible, hopes that the characters will nevertheless express his love, thus *turning the reader into a lover*:

I write without seeing [...]. I write that I love you; at least, that is what I want to write [...]. This is the first time I have ever written in the dark [...] not knowing whether I am indeed forming letters. Where there will be nothing, read that I love you.<sup>22</sup> **INDIGO**



Dino Alfier, Drawings 1 – 49 for Bâton de l'aveugle



Dino Alfier, Drawings 50 – 98 for Bâton de l'aveugle

1) 'Ainsi nos moments de clairvoyance cartésienne nous sont inutiles sans un art de percevoir, c'est-à-dire une gymnastique qui nous permet de rappeler le pur entendement, sans cesser pourtant, comme nous faisons au moment de la réflexion, d'être attentifs aux danses de notre corps. Mais cette gymnastique même ne nous serait sans doute jamais accessible, sans l'expérience de perceptions privilégiées, par lesquelles la danse spontanée de notre corps, tout en s'imposant parfois à l'attention, n'empêche jamais, et peut-être aide, l'exercice du pur entendement. Ces perceptions privilégiées sont fournies à chacun de nous par l'humanité dans les œuvres d'arts.' Weil, 1988, p138.

2) Ibid., pp121-139.

3) Weil, 2008, pp73-79.

4) In blind contour drawing, the drawer fixes his or her eyes on the outline of the object, drawing the contour with a continuous line without lifting the pencil or looking at the paper.

5) Weil worked in several factories to study the conditions of workers. I chose this image because it is the most iconic of all of Weil's photographic portraits: it has been used extensively on the covers of many books by and on Weil. Amongst the many factors which render this image so iconic, I will refer to the following two: firstly, its frontality and the impassibility of Weil's expression – which, I venture, will be read by many as a representation of Weil's moral staunchness; secondly, the image might remind one that Weil sought contact with that hard reality (she, a well-to-do Parisian, chose to become a factory worker) which she so keenly advocated.

6) Reprinted in this paper are images of the first 98 drawings made for *Bâton de l'aveugle*, in chronological order, left to right, top to bottom.

7) Ibid., pp73-79, p75-76. As Claude Droz argues, for Weil, '[...] attention transforms the force of impressions by transforming imagination.' Droz, 2008, p406.

8) Weil, 1985, pp154-155. Weil appropriates the simile of the blind person from Descartes's *Optics* (see: Descartes, 1985, p153f, p166, p169f). However, that is not to say that Weil subscribes to Descartes' physiological account of vision; rather she uses Descartes' image metaphorically and in different contexts; for instance, Weil uses it to illustrate not only the idea of reading and of the possibility of shifting one's attention, but also that of *metaxu* or means between a human and a transcendental being. The blind person simile appears many times in Weil's notebooks. See for instance: Weil, 1994, p110, p201, p290, pp293-295, p308-309, p316, p322, p329, pp338-339, pp410-411; Weil, 1997, p73, p145, p247, p337, pp356-357, p465.

9) '[...] quand le soleil le lève, je ne sais si le paysage me paraît plus joyeux parce que j'éprouve plus de joie, ou parce que le soleil est plus haut ; un paysage réel est éclairé aussi bien par mon bonheur que par les rayons du soleil.' Weil, (1988), p138.

10) Ibid., p122, p127, p132.

11) Ibid., p137. Weil, 2008, p79.

12) '[...] en un lever de soleil peint, si la lumière me peut donner de la joie, jamais cette joie ne sera accompagnée d'un accroissement de lumière.' Weil, 1988, p138.

13) Ibid., pp137-139.

14) Weil, 2008, p79.

15) Weil, 1988, p138. Michel Narcy argues that Weil conceptualised necessity in Cartesian fashion as blind, i.e. as not having *finality*, or, rather, as having a *finality without finality*\*, that is as a work of art. Narcy, 2003, pp237-253, pp33-34. \* For an investigation of the view of artistic creation as characterised by finality without finality, see: Lyotard, 1991, p172.

16) By 'content' I mean that which one reads in the 'form.' For example, if one writes the word 'house' first in lower case and then in capital letters, one changes the form but not the content of



the word. I do realise that this is a simplification. For instance, take a text written all in lower case except for the word 'HOUSE' which is written in capitals: would that not change the content of the text? I think it would, at least at the level of connotation, if not at that of denotation.

17) Indeterminacy seems to me more indifferent than determinacy, because in the latter one possesses at least a certain degree of control in the form of an understanding of the determining law, while in the former no such knowledge is available.

18) The hope remains unfulfilled.

19) Weil distinguishes between two orders of attention: intellectual attention and the most elevated attention. Intellectual attention '[...] gives rise to reality [...]' seen as a web of necessary connections. Without this kind of attention, there would be no thinkable reality\*, i.e. no reality at all. Weil calls this non-reality state 'the kingdom of Proteus,' because, in such a state, everything would be protean discontinuity ungraspable by thought.± But the reality to which intellectual attention gives rise is only a half-reality in comparison to the full reality perceived by the one who consents to, who loves, all that happens.§ \* Weil, 1985, pp154-155. ± Weil, 1988, pp127-129, p386. § Weil, 1985, pp154-155.

20) Very often Weil states that God and reality are one and the same thing.

21) 'Ce n'est pas qu'il faille aimer le mal. Mais il faut aimer Dieu à travers le mal. Quand un enfant en jouant brise un objet précieux, la mère n'aime pas cette destruction. Mais si plus tard son fils s'en va au loin ou meurt, elle [...] pense à cette accident avec tendresse parce qu'elle n'y voit plus qu'une des manifestations de l'existence de son enfant.' Weil, S, (2008), pp272-273.

22) This translation is quoted, with some additions, from Derrida, 1993, p1. The original French reads: 'J'écris sans voir [...]. Je vous écris que je vous aime, je veux du moins vous l'écrire [...] Voilà la première fois que j'écris dans les ténèbres [...] sans savoir si je forme des caractères. Partout où il n'y aura rien, lisez que je vous aime.' Diderot, 1984, p48.

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